

Structured Improvisation: Developing Functional Skills for Pianists

Teaching Structured Improvisation: Purpose and Advantages

- Provides avenue for applying functional skills
- Develops independence
- Develops confidence
- Improves sight reading
- Provides context for applying theory knowledge

Overview of Structured Improvisation

- Goal: Develop ears, fingers, brain, and heart
- Approach: Create manageable learning units
- Practice – create instant success

Step 1: Play by Ear

- *Anyone* can play by ear
- Playing by ear: trial-and-error learning process?
- Pedagogical principles
 - start with what is known
 - develop a learning sequence
 - encourage success at each step (mastery principle)
 - transfer what is learned to new situations
- Work at the student's level
 - if too simple, student gets bored
 - if too difficult, student is overwhelmed

Step 2: Relate playing by ear to music theory

- Use Structured Improvisational Units (SIUs) to clarify structure
- Clarify structural goals in the music (i.e. rhythmic arrivals, cadences, etc.)
- Sequence concepts so that all concepts are related and make sense in context
- Ask questions to help student apply theory

Step 3: Relate playing by ear to reading music

- Try an approach similar to Rebecca Shockley's *Mapping Music*
 - allow student to sketch, draw, or make notes about the music
 - use this “map” as a guide for playing by ear
 - allow the student to look at the music if necessary, but not while playing
 - use the hymnal (or other music) in lessons to help clarify structure

Step 4: Encourage fluency

- Start with the ear, rather than sight reading
- Start by emphasizing smaller structural units
- Start with simpler structures

Step 5: Expand and Embellish

- The core structure does not change
- Expand by doubling and extending range of keyboard
- Embellishments become natural extensions of the basic structure

Examples

#1 Brethren, We Have Met to Worship

#2 Jesus Shall Reign

Brethren, We Have Met to Worship

Two staves of music in G major (one sharp) and common time. The first staff contains the melody for the first line of the hymn, and the second staff contains the melody for the second line. The lyrics are written below the notes.

Breth-ren, we have met to wor - ship

And a - dore the Lord our God;

A handwritten musical map on yellowed paper, showing fingerings and positions for the hymn 'Brethren, We Have Met to Worship'. It consists of eight staves, each with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notation includes numbers (1-5) and symbols (I, V, ∇) indicating fingerings and positions. The first staff begins with a 4/4 time signature and a G-clef. The map is organized into four pairs of staves, each pair corresponding to a line of the hymn's melody.

Anna's improvisational map for *Brethren, We Have Met to Worship*

(cf. Shockley, Mapping Music)

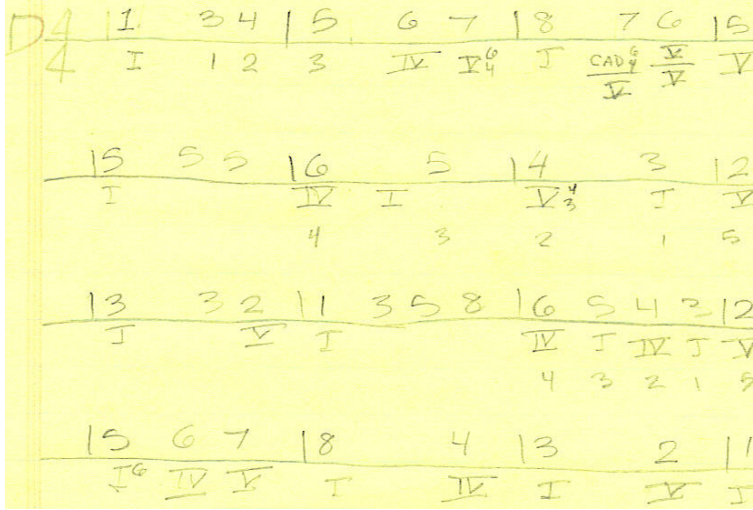
Jesus Shall Reign

Two staves of music in D major (two sharps) and 4/4 time. The first staff contains the melody for the first line of the hymn, and the second staff contains the melody for the second line. The lyrics are written below the notes.

Je - sus shall reign where - e'er the sun

Does his suc - ces - sive jour - neys run;

Jesus Shall Reign



**Sylvia's improvisational map for
*Jesus Shall Reign***

(cf. Shockley, Mapping Music)

Concepts

- Key, Meter
- Tonality, Scale degrees
- Non-harmonic tones (NHTs)
- Intervals
- Harmonic structure / progressions
- Cadences
- Transposition and modulation
- Fingering
- Relationship of rhythmic groups to meter (e.g. anacrusis / crusis)
- Consonance and dissonance
- Tension and resolution
- Phrase structure / Form
- Expressive playing
- Creativity